

Monday, January 8th, 2007

The first 2 days of the 100th Congress are now in the books. The first couple of days are normally filled with pretty uninteresting stuff. The speaker is elected, but it's not like there's any suspense about the outcome. Then speaker swears in all the members en masse. And then, we have to organize the new Congress and vote on a new set of arcane rules by which we govern ourselves. This year was noteworthy because of a change in control of the House and the beginning of the Democrat's "100 Hour" agenda.

So, here are my random observations about the first 2 days of the 110th Congress. We normally vote using an electronic device into which we insert our voting card and then press one of the buttons marked "aye," "no" or "present." The one vote (as far as I know) that is still recorded by a oral roll call is the vote to elect the speaker. In theory, this is because there is no House and no rules until there is a speaker. So, for this one vote, the clerk calls each of the 435 names in alphabetical order.

- Most everyone voted for their choice as speaker simply by calling out the name of either "Pelosi" or of the House Republican leader "Boehner" (pronounced bay-ner). The vote was straight party line as it usually is, but a few of the members who voted for Nancy Pelosi added some editorial comment. Amongst the most interesting were Linda Sanchez (D-CA) who added her comment entirely in Spanish, and Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-IL) who cast his vote for Pelosi "in the name of Jesus."
- All of the members of the House are sworn in by the new speaker at one time. We simply stand in front of our seats, raise our right hands, and say "I do" after the oath is read by the speaker. There has been much controversy over the new member Keith Ellison (D-Minn.) who was going to swear on the Koran. Looking around me, I did not see a single person with a Bible, Koran or book of any kind. It's just not how the official oath is done. The controversy regarding the Koran was actually related to an unofficial ceremony done for purposes of a photo opportunity. In the past in similar situations, I have held a 140 year old family Bible for historical family reasons.
- Part of Speaker Pelosi's speech went as follows: "It's an historic moment for the women of America. It's a moment for which we have waited over 200 years... For our daughters and granddaughters, today, we have broken the marble ceiling. For our daughters and granddaughters, now, the sky is the limit. Anything is possible for them." Now the sky is the limit? Are there no more barriers to women because Nancy Pelosi is speaker? Do Condi Rice, Margaret Thatcher, Amelia Earhart and countless other successful women in sports, business, politics, theater etc. not matter? One interesting note concerning the line about how "now the sky is the limit," was that I heard it during the speech, and it is in the transcripts of the House record. However, on Pelosi's official website, that line has been omitted.

- The press corps always stands outside the House floor in a place called the "speaker's lobby". During my year here, most of them stood on the Republican side waiting to talk to members when they come off the floor. This week, almost all of them were on the Democratic side of the lobby.

- Whoever is in the majority can change or rename committees as they choose. No committees were changed yet. But several were renamed by the incoming Democrats. The "Education and Workforce" committee is now the "Committee on Education and Labor." "International Relations" is now "Foreign Affairs," and the "Government Reform" committee is now the "Committee on Oversight and Government Reform." These name changes are indicative of the new direction for each committee that the incoming chairman will lead.

- Oh yes, get ready for the tax increase proposals. The Democrats went to great lengths in the first two days to change the House rules to make it easier to raise taxes. It is not hard to predict what they are going to try and do over the next two years. A few of the controversial rules changes were (1) the deletion of the requirement of a 3/5ths vote to raise taxes in committee and a prohibition on retroactive tax increases (2) votes in the Rules committee will no longer be recorded so that there will be no record of who voted for what (3) Earmarks will continue similar to the way they were before with some additional disclosure (4) Democrats put in their "paygo" rules about which you will hear more later, but they create justification for tax increases and (5) no Republican amendments will be allowed on any of the bills of the "100 hour" agenda. Now, that's bipartisanship and openness huh?

Until next week, I remain respectfully,

Congressman John Campbell